

Waakaa'igan | A New Native Canadian Centre of Toronto

AIA Canada Student Design Award Submission
Submitted on: April 30, 2025
Project completion: December 2024

STUDIO/PROJECT BRIEF

In this Studio, we'll design a revitalized Native Canadian Centre of Toronto that embodies Indigenous values and traditions while serving as a vibrant hub for the community. We will emphasize the idea of placekeeping by respecting and enhancing the site's (Ishpadinaa) cultural and historical significance, while integrating elements that reflect Indigenous heritage and contemporary identity. We will consider sustainable practices and innovative design solutions that foster a welcoming, inclusive, and functional space for educational, cultural, retail, and social activities, strengthening the Centre's role as a cornerstone of Indigenous life in Toronto..

BACKGROUND & ARTIFACT

The creation of a new Native Canadian Centre of Toronto (NCCT) is based around the following Indigenous Design Guidelines, developed by Two Row Architect:

Welcoming + Inclusive
Openness + Connection
Access to Nature
Permanence + Presence

Using these values, and through the creation of a physical artifact (Figure 1) which manifests these, a position emerged on the cyclical potential of architecture. Using Tommy Thompson Park as a precedent, the example of building up and breaking down is highlighted. The artifact explores the idea of bricks decomposing, gradually reclaimed by nature.



Figure 1: Artifact

PROJECT VISION

Since the arrival of settlers on Turtle Island, architecture has often created a tension between buildings and the earth. Indigenous approaches to shelter, however, demonstrate a harmonious cycle between structures and the land.

The vision for the new Native Canadian Centre of Toronto embodies the restoration of a harmonious and cyclical relationship between the built environment and the natural world. The design aspires to create an architecture that celebrates diversity—not only among its human occupants but across all forms of life, including the atmosphere, flora, and fauna.

Beyond reconnecting humanity and nature, the new NCCT seeks to revitalise the cycle of Indigenous culture and education, disrupted through generations of colonial oppression. A portion of the original building is preserved, standing as a reminder of a colonial past. Through deliberate design interventions, this architecture symbolically fractures and opens pathways for Indigenous culture to flourish in the contemporary world. The colonial architecture is not erased but broken down, embodying both a remembrance of past injustices and the restoration of Indigenous practices.

By re-establishing this cyclical relationship with nature, culture, and education, the Centre becomes a beacon of inclusivity, openness, and connection, reinstating the presence and vitality of Indigenous culture within the fabric of a modern urban environment.

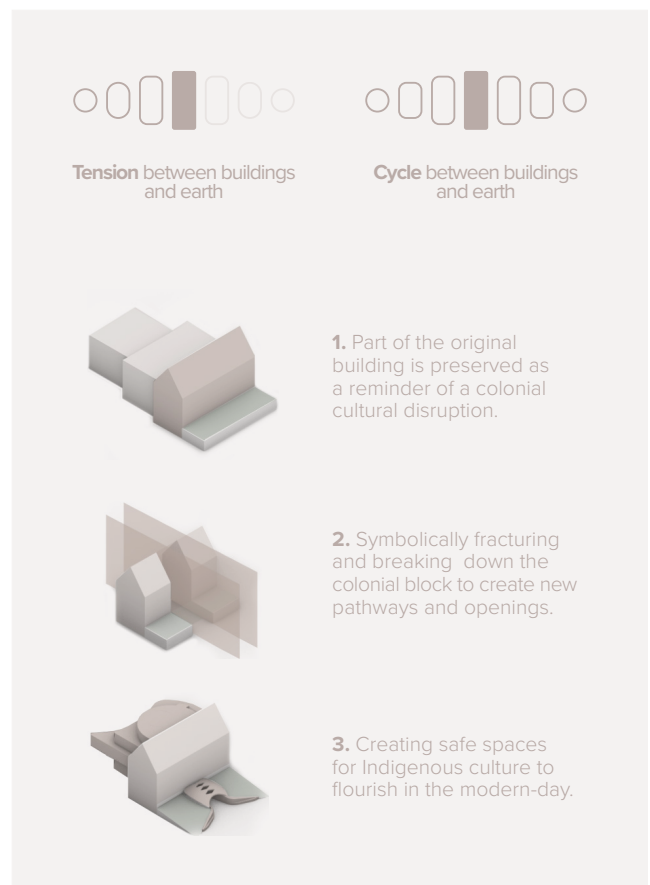


Figure 2: Parti & Massing Diagrams

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT & SITE SIGNIFICANCE

Central to the Centre's vision is the restoration of a cyclical relationship between the urban built environment and the natural world, essential for revitalizing Indigenous culture within a contemporary context. This vision is guided by the principle of "Two-Eyed Seeing," which harmonizes human needs with a profound understanding of ecosystems and the environment. Through a sensitive and deliberate approach, elements of the natural world are reintroduced into the urban fabric without resorting to large-scale demolition. Instead, breaking down barriers between neighbours fosters stronger community bonds and reconnects people to nature.

The architecture of the new NCCT embraces transformation to align more closely with natural systems. Sculpting the building massing and site to facilitate water management exemplifies how manmade structures can work in harmony with the climate. Allocating space for trees and selecting native vegetation address critical urban challenges such as the heat island effect and food insecurity in natural, sustainable ways. Careful consideration of hardscapes and their role in connecting people to the landscape ensures nature becomes an integral part of daily life.

In acknowledging the harm inflicted upon traditional Indigenous territories, the new NCCT offers tangible solutions to restore and honour these elements within a modern framework. By employing a "Two-Eyed Seeing" approach, the Centre envisions a future where natural resources are respected and nurtured, ensuring their longevity and the well-being of all who depend upon them.

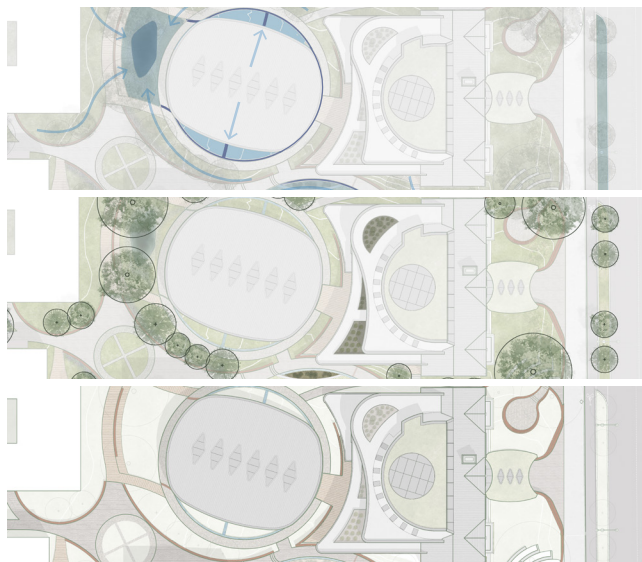


Figure 3: Layered approach to landscape and site.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

At the heart of the new NCCT's philosophy lies the ambition to reinforce the cyclical relationship between the built environment and the natural world. This is realized through a deliberate interaction with the land, achieved via strategies such as water management, thoughtful vegetation placement, and the reshaping of topography. Together, the building and site work in harmony to restore a connection to nature, balancing the needs of the NCCT with those of the environment.

The architecture itself embraces environmental considerations at every level, from spatial arrangement and form to materiality. A key goal was the integration of nature within the building, fostering dialogue and appreciation for natural features in a constructed context. In turn, the design actively gives back to the environment by incorporating green roofs, trails, and outdoor spaces, all seamlessly woven into the project.



Figure 4: A Revitalized NCCT integrated within its landscape.

CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY

Symbolically, the architecture of the NCCT breaks through the existing colonial structure, allowing Indigenous culture to permeate and reclaim space within modern society. Cultural elements are thoughtfully embedded throughout the building. For example, the gathering room's structure (Figure 5) resembles a turtle shell, referencing creation stories and the Indigenous lunar calendar. Six skylights represent the six nations, while the ceiling's materials form a wampum belt. Elsewhere, terra cotta cladding evokes the beads of a wampum, integrating this cultural motif into an urban setting.

The NCCT is designed to foster meaningful interactions and preserve cultural traditions. Alongside designated programming spaces, informal seating areas, fireplace lounges, and open gathering zones encourage oral storytelling and community conversations. The second floor is particularly symbolic, featuring children's and elders' rooms linked by a communal fire—a physical and metaphorical connection promoting intergenerational knowledge-sharing and the continuation of traditions. Other spaces, such as the fourth-floor sky observatory, similarly create a safe space to pass down knowledge and stories that relate to our planet and atmosphere.



Figure 5: Community gathering room with embedded cultural narratives and symbolism.